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**The following is an op-ed piece written by George M. Dennison**

University of Montana–Missoula. Office of University Relations

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## **NEWS RELEASE**

Feb. 28, 2006

*The following is an op-ed piece written by George M. Dennison, President, The University of Montana. Attached is a recent photo of President Dennison for your use at any time.*

Nearly half of Montana's recent high school graduates won't attend college. In fact, fewer Montana high school students enroll in college than in most other states across the nation – even though the majority of Montana's recent high school graduates receive good preparation for college. So, why do so many fail to protect their options by pursuing higher education?

When asked, many of these Montana students say that they can't afford to go to college. These observant and intelligent young people know that tuition costs continue to rise at Montana's colleges and universities. They know that most family incomes in Montana have not kept pace with inflation. They hear stories of young people who get a college degree along with a tremendous loan debt they must repay after graduation.

These students don't know, or maybe don't believe, that their earning power increases with a college degree. I'll say it again here: On a national level, the difference in annual earnings between a high school graduate and a college graduate five years after college exceeds \$20,000. Students who enter the workforce without a college degree will, on average, lose earning power every year of their working careers. In other words, inflation will outpace whatever salary increases they achieve over the course of their working life. They will never find it possible to afford any better quality of life than at the outset. On the other hand, those with a college degree will earn about \$1 million more over their working careers than counterparts with only high school diplomas.

In addition, these students may not realize that the traditional occupations in Montana that often do not require a college education – farming, ranching, mining, forest industries, for example – are changing. The state is changing. Montana's young people need to prepare themselves for those changes by seeking education beyond the high school level so that they can take advantage of career opportunities that will come with those changes. We in Montana cannot afford to have a non-college-educated workforce as we move into the 21st century. We need to change the mindset of our young people across the state so that they believe college is affordable – no matter the family income and assets.

With the approval of the Board of Regents as a pilot project, The University of Montana has made a step in that direction with MPACT – Montana Partnering for Affordable College Tuition. We designed this new program to help recent graduates from Montana's high schools get beyond the "cost of a college education" barrier. The program seeks to make sure that students from Montana have access to an affordable college degree. We want to make certain that every

-more-



MPACT targets recent high school graduates who have maintained a B average or better, score at least 25 on the ACT exam – with a 2.5 average for the College of Technology and no SAT requirement -- and meet certain income requirements (essentially eligibility for the federal Pell Grant). Students who qualify for MPACT will receive financial aid packages designed to make the basic costs of attending college at The University of Montana or the College of Technology at UM affordable.

And the best part? The majority of the MPACT financial aid package does not come in the form of loans requiring repayment. In fact, the packages reduce the potential debt burden of students after graduation, cutting the burden at least by one-half. We see MPACT as a first step to shore up Montana's limited grant aid programs for students. The first students to receive MPACT financial aid packages will attend UM and COT beginning Fall Semester 2006. Financial support for MPACT now comes from federal grant and some loan funds and University funds drawn from the contingency account for the pilot phase. As mentioned, we have implemented the pilot project for the coming year to demonstrate that it will work. If as expected it proves successful, the Regents will ask the governor and Montana Legislature for funding for the Montana University System in the next biennium.

We believe this program has many benefits, not only for the students who qualify, but also for the future economic stability of Montana. The program will help those students who qualify now, but the anticipated long-term benefit accrues to the State of Montana from an educated citizenry. As virtually everyone agrees, we cannot have a new economy resting solidly on good-paying jobs without an educated workforce. The program allows the student to choose the path to follow for the education needed, either for a vocational/technical certificate or degree or a four-year degree.

Montana needs an educated work force capable of responding to a variety of opportunities – and Montana's hard-working students deserve the opportunity to follow their career aspirations. We believe this program has the potential to serve both needs.

For more details about the MPACT program, interested parents, school administrators and counselors, and students can call UM's Enrollment Services at (800) 462-8636 or access the information online at <http://www.umt.edu/mpact>.

*George Dennison is in his 16<sup>th</sup> year as President of The University of Montana.*